

**ROWLETT CITIZEN CORPS COUNCIL
ROWLETT COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM
Project Report**

Preface

In the 1950's and particularly in the early 1960's there was a heightened awareness of the need for community involvement in programs that strengthened survivability and stability in the event of a major disaster. The obviously focus at that time was the potential of a nuclear conflict. As the cold war disappeared and the memories of that era faded, the idea of volunteerism or civil defense began to diminish and became lost in time. Americans felt secure that a threat on United States soil was not possible, and that our defenses were adequate to squelch any group or country that attempted to disrupt our way of life. The next two generations would not see the fear, uncertainty, and community cohesion that were experience during that era.

September 11, 2001, showed the United States and the American people that our security is not absolute. That day is replayed in the minds of all Americans with the stunning reality that so very few could inflict something of such great magnitude and damage on our soil. There was no army, there was no invasion, and there was no war. Just a planned attack by a few fanatics designed to disrupt the very security Americans had come to feel, enjoy, and expect.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address, gave America a wake-up call and a challenge. He recognized that in order to stand strong and combat fanatical terrorism, the American people would need to build on their own strengths as neighbors and communities to thrive in a new environment of uncertainty. The

idealistic view of the Federal Government being the great caretaker of the homeland was not the reality we had come to realize. Bush's charge was to the point and specific – get involved, volunteer, and be active in the community in which you live. The idea was to plan, prepare, and be informed. It was, at that moment, a reality check for all citizens that maybe, just maybe, the 9-11 scenario could happen again and this time it might be in your community.

Federal Implementation

The President's speech immediately translated into an effort by the Federal Government to provide additional targeted tools and information for volunteerism and disaster preparedness. Through direction from the Department of Homeland Security, the plan to organize communities would go much farther than potential terrorist acts, to other scenarios affecting a community at large. Other scenarios were expanded to include natural and manmade disasters not related to terrorism. Emphasis was placed on organizations that would take an “all hazards” approach to disaster preparedness and family safety.

Local Implementation

The City of Rowlett, Texas recognized the issue early on and acted to secure the safety of our citizens. As a bedroom community of approximately 50,000 residents, it was a prime candidate for a program that could mobilize trained volunteer citizens quickly in the event that a disaster or crisis affected a large portion of our community. The City Council endorsed President Bush's charge and went forward with support to create a new sense of volunteerism in Rowlett.

For Rowlett, the process would become relatively easy as we were proactively responding before the new initiative. Fortunately, in the summer prior to 9-11, the Fire Chief had begun to organize a group of residents in the community for disaster relief duties. Two Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services (RACES) members were sent to a CERT Train-the-Trainer class at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In the spring of 2002, the first CERT Trainer class was taught in Rowlett and a total of 17 trainers completed the class in preparation for implementation of the CERT program.

The City of Rowlett embarked on the widespread implementation of the CERT program in the fall of 2002. Advertising and promotional materials were prepared, the program was presented to the City Council, and a schedule for the first CERT class was developed. The first CERT class commenced in January 2003. In conjunction with this class, the formation of the Rowlett Citizen Corps Council (RCCC) was completed in April to serve as an oversight and funding vehicle for the CERT program. Parallel to its formation was an application to the Internal Revenue Service for 501(c)(3) status as a charitable, non-profit organization, which was subsequently approved in August. Up until this point funding for the CERT program had been mostly from Rowlett Fire Rescue. However, program leadership foresaw that additional funding would be necessary to realize the full vision of CERT in our community. In order to solicit donations and apply for non-governmental grants, the 501(c)(3) charitable non-profit status was a must.

The mission of the RCCC is to harness the power of the citizens of Rowlett, Texas through education, training, and volunteer service to make the

community safer, stronger and better prepared to respond to threats of terrorism, crime, public health issues, and disasters of any kind. This mission is accomplished through the development of community-based programs that build on the strengths of the community and implement plans for the community to participate through personal responsibility, training and volunteer service. The RCCC emblem emblazons our resolve in three words: volunteer, community, and response.

Under RCCC, three branches of CERT were created to administrate the program: (1) CERT, which solicits volunteers as first responders in the event of major disasters to augment public safety in those first critical hours, (2) CERT-Relief, which consists of teams of four to six personnel that are on-call 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. weekdays, and 24 hours on weekends and holidays for response to fire or police incidents that may extend beyond a couple of hours of operation, to provide support and rehabilitation services. The team extends their help beyond the border of Rowlett into our neighboring city of Sachse, and (3) CERT-COMM, which are the RACES amateur radio operators who provide a vital communications link from the field to the Emergency Operations Center when pressed into service.

In addition to the G317 CERT course, we realized that CERT teams need additional training to build on those skills already attained. We ask our teams to keep current CPR/AED and First Aid certifications as well as suggest additional courses from the American Red Cross for Introduction to Disaster, Damage Assessment, and Shelter Operations. Additional training reinforces CERT and promotes the retention, development, and leadership of members.

RCCC identified a five-phased implementation plan by going back to the beginning and reviewing all steps taken so far with a look to the future:

- *Phase One, Train-the-Trainer* – two FEMA trained Train-the-Trainers are qualified to teach a CERT Trainer course.
- *Phase Two, Instructor Base* – 17 citizens graduated from a G417 CERT Trainer course.
- *Phase Three, Neighborhood Response* – 21 citizens graduate from G317 CERT course and are qualified as CERT team members. Estimated trained by December 2003 is 85-100.
- *Phase Four, Business CERT* – Develop plans to include the business community.
- *Phase Five, School CERT* – Develop plans to include the independent school district.

The City of Rowlett has identified 24 geographic areas within the city limits that represent neighborhood CERT districts, which are bounded by major thoroughfares. The purpose of identifying the CERT districts was to assign CERT members to areas where they live and know by memory. Our CERT members best know their neighborhoods and are able to give specific insight into what is unique in their area. In the event of an emergency activation of CERT, they would have the greatest ability to relay necessary information to public safety, identify structures that are damaged or destroyed, and give an accurate accounting of the residents in their area.

The value of the CERT program should not be limited to only emergency activations. The program extends to everyday crisis and non-emergency uses for community volunteers. CERT team members assist the City at

most public events and have proven to be a valuable resource wherever volunteer involvement can be safely integrated. For example, CERT teams might participate in a non-disaster activation by assisting in the search for a lost child in a neighborhood. CERT team members assigned to that CERT district would quickly be able to identify possible hiding spots and hazards for public safety personnel and guide them in searching. Quickly mobilized teams can also be available to assist public safety for evacuations, traffic control, communications and other situations where resources may be insufficient or taxed.

A successful CERT program must have a well-oiled public relations program, a strong leadership team, collaboration with other like-minded groups, and the support and cooperation of local government. These elements drive the program and provide forward momentum, recruiting new students and boosting public interest in disaster preparedness and family safety along the way. Weak links in any of these areas can quickly cripple a program.

Status

As of October 2003, the City of Rowlett has trained 67 citizens in CERT and has a total of 82 citizens involved in the three areas of RCCC. Using the FY02 grant monies from FEMA, the City of Rowlett on behalf of RCCC has purchased CERT equipment that will be distributed to each CERT member. The equipment includes an equipment bag, helmet, goggles, basic rescue tools, vest, gloves, first aid kit, and flashlight. Each active member will be required to periodically inventory the bag and maintain it in a state of readiness for team activation. The ultimate goal for RCCC is to have approximately 275 members trained and ready to respond to any crisis or disaster that threatens our community.

The Future

The RCCC is developing an ongoing plan to sustain commitment from CERT members who participate in the program through additional training, mock disaster drills, and regular meetings. RCCC has asked CERT-COMM to develop a communications system plan that will allow coordinated communications of CERT teams with RACES and the Emergency Operations Center. We are investigating the process of supplying hand-held GPS units to each team to better identify areas affected by a major event, and highlight areas for access, landing sites and staging. RCCC will continue to seek out additional funding sources to furnish tools and training necessary to complete our mission. We have created a CERT Development Committee that reports to the RCCC Board of Directors for the purpose of providing resource, guidance and direction to our CERT Administrator.

The commitment of the City of Rowlett and RCCC is clear and unwavering in our dedication to CERT and its mission for disaster preparedness and family safety. Because of the CERT program, Rowlett is a safer, stronger, better-prepared community with a rich sense of volunteerism and community service.